

A shadow on the  
wall—it would never go away!

# LAMP OF THE LAUGHING WITCH

by MICHAEL PRAETORIUS

"I DON'T THINK I can do it," Maud whispered. She seemed to fade behind the livid floral print of the old-fashioned loveseat. Her hands visibly trembled over her tatting. "And it's not quite dark yet. I can still see. Please, Agnes, couldn't we wait just a little while longer?"

"You know perfectly well that the lights in this house go on promptly at six o'clock. Perhaps you can still see, but I can't." She glanced down at the black crepe stuff she was sewing, then focused her hawk-like glare at the cowering form of her younger sister. "And sit up straight, for goodness sake." She turned to face her youngest sister, the baby of the family.

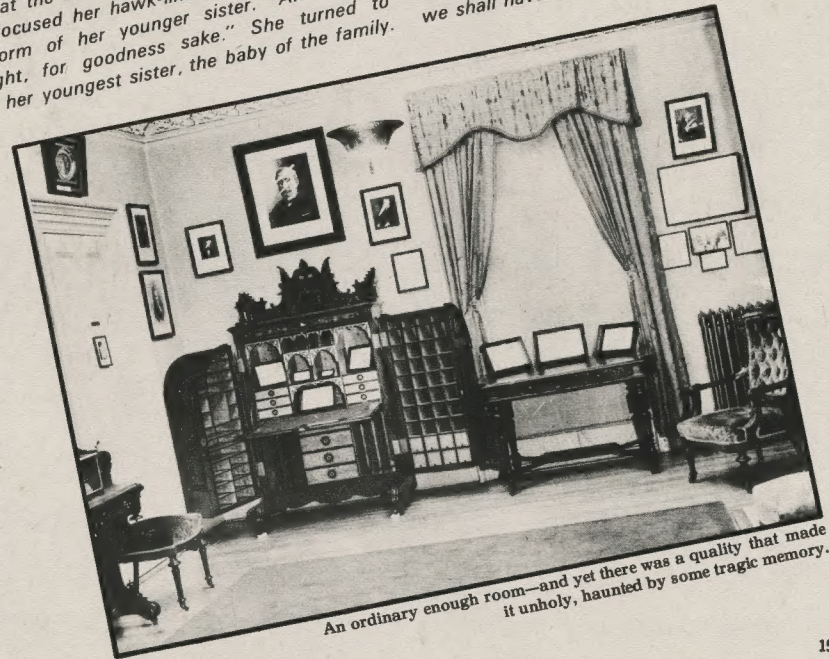
"Bess, will you light it? You're nearer than I am." The younger woman shrugged, then stood up. She was many years the junior of the seated ladies, and still in the prime of life. But cruel experience had hardened her lovely features. Bending over gracefully, she struck a match and lit the lamp.

Shadows suddenly loomed up on the walls. None of the women looked around the room. Bess nearly tripped over her long skirt in her hurry to avoid seeing anything about her. She took her place in the only comfortable chair in the parlor.

The silence was unendurable as each dared not glance up. It was Maud who finally broke it. Slowly she lifted her wrinkled face, and gasped. "Oh God, it's there again. It wasn't the furniture after all. I told you, it looks like..."

"Don't be a fool, Maud!" Agnes spoke sharply. "It is a shadow cast by something in this room, nothing more. When Henry comes back, we shall have him help

(Continued on next page)



An ordinary enough room—and yet there was a quality that made it unholy, haunted by some tragic memory.



us rearrange the room again and again and again until it goes away."

"It won't go away. After Henry was so horrid to William, William vowed never to leave—*never!*"

"Heaven, preserve us," Bess drawled lazily. "I believe we're spooked."

"And that will be quite enough out of you, young lady," Agnes snapped. "I've told you time and time again that your fancy New York manners have no place in this house. And put out that cigarette. You know perfectly well Father never allowed any of us to smoke—not even the boys."

Bess sighed and flicked the butt. It landed in a carved soapstone urn.

"Oh Bess, not in Mother's favorite vase. How could you," Maud gently chided. "But Agnes, the shadow is still there. It's Henry's fault. He's the one . . ."

"Anyone mention my name?" came a cold reply from the hall. Maud gasped again and bit her lip to avoid crying from vexation.

A sturdy figure entered the room. "Ladies," the man said, bowing from the waist.

"I thought you said you'd be gone for a few days, Henry," Agnes gathered the black material into a neat pile.

"I don't have to explain everything to my dear sisters, do I? After all, I'm the one who pays the bills around here. If it weren't for me, you'd have been in the poorhouse years ago. My business is exactly that—my business."

"Father said we could always live in this house. It was in his will, dear brother. Even William."

"Be quiet this instant, Maud. You know I won't tolerate to hear his name spoken here. He was lazy and a spendthrift. He spent his inheritance and I had every right in the world to, ah, to . . ." Henry fumbled for the word he wanted.

"To kick him out on his rear, sweets," Bess smilingly filled in for him. "And just look what you've brought down on our heads." She languidly pointed to the wall near the huge oak desk.

Henry cursed; then in a fit of anger, tossed his walking stick at the shadow. His aim was off, and the can brought down a framed silhouette from the wall. It smashed at Maud's feet.

She shrieked from fright.

"See what you've done, Henry. Control yourself. We're all under enough strain as it is without your adding any more. You know it must be cast by something in this room.

It has to be," Agnes stood up. "Stop crying, Maud. It is time for dinner. Come."

"I'll be by in a moment," Henry muttered as he stooped to retrieve his cane.

"Bess, if you say one more word, I'll ship you back to that no-good drunkard you married in New York. And stop sniveling, Maud." Agnes' voice clearly echoed in the hallway leading to the dining room.

Henry sat down, facing the wall opposite the desk. He sat for a long time. Then rising suddenly, he moved the sewing table. Some material fell to the floor. He impatiently kicked it away. Cursing again, he left for the dining room.

"**D**ID YOU ALL have a pleasant time today?" Henry asked politely as he helped himself to mashed potatoes. "Well, speak up. Have you suddenly turned into mummies? I can remember the time I couldn't fit a word in edgewise."

"Very pleasant, Henry, very pleasant," Agnes broke in quickly. "Maud helped me count linens and then we went to the attic to see how many of Mother's laces were still good. Moths, you know."

"Oh yes," Maud chirped hurriedly, glad to be of some use. "And we found a whole carton of our old toys. There was your hoop, Henry, the one you painted green and gold. Although it was a little bent and some of the gilt was coming off. And your doll, Bess. What was its name—Tinker? And my old bear. And William's . . . oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start anything."

Henry put down his fork and sighed. "All right." He stood up and said in a dangerously quiet tone of voice: "It's time for a little family discussion. I'm not stupid. I know you hate and despise me for what I did to poor, dear old harmless William. But let me remind you that he had run through his fortune and was starting on ours. Why, another few months and we would all have been paupers."

"So you threw him out of the house. You've always hated William—even when you were a child. And let me remind you of something else. Father always said that we could live here—all of us—no matter what happened," Agnes interrupted. "William died in a ginmill."

"He was so good, so kind and gentle. Surely you wouldn't have begrudged him food and shelter.

And you must have known he was dying, Henry. Poor William." Maud quietly began sobbing into her napkin.

"Don't be foolish, Maud."

"Don't be foolish, Maud," mimicked Bess. "That's all we hear around here. Well, it just so happens that I agree with her. William was the only decent one of all of us."

"You may leave the table, Bess. I've had just about enough of you for one evening. And that goes of the whole lot of you. No, sit. I'd hate to disturb you." Henry stalked to the door. Then turning around to face them, he added: "Don't any of you go into the parlor tonight. I have some repairs to make and I do not wish to be disturbed." He closed the door after him.

"Oh, Agnes, what are we going to do? I've never seen Henry in such a state before!" In her agitation, Maud upset her glass of wine. Its dark red hue spread slowly over the pure white linen tablecloth. The three ladies watched in fascination as the liquid slowly formed a pattern.

"Was that how it was for William?" murmured Bess. "Lying on a sawdust floor as his life seeped out of him. What was it they say he died of?"

"Consumption." Agnes stood up. "Bess, clear the table. And I want you to take that stain out of the cloth, Maud. Spilling things at your age. Really, it's too much."

"What was that—listen! There it is again."

They stopped moving and concentrated on the noise.

"It's Henry—it sounds as if he is taking apart the whole house!"

Glass crashed to the floor, and the black-clad ladies ran down the hall to the parlor door. It was locked.

"Henry—for God's sake, open up. What are you doing? Stop it this instant! Henry, listen to me!"

"Leave me alone, damn you! Get out of here. I have to fix something—that's all," came the breathless reply.

"Open this door, Henry!" Agnes pounded again.

It swung forward so suddenly that she was nearly pitched into the parlor.

"What is it now!" His eyes blazing, his hair falling across his forehead, Henry almost looked like a madman. The small portion of the room visible behind him showed the fury of his actions. Tables overturned, lamps broken, a

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the Guardian Angel if you will, is still there. We can't destroy that—and to be honest with you, I don't see why anyone should want to. The girl will be there always, unseen, unfelt, invisible, to guard the inhabitants of the mansion whatsoever."

"I suppose we can't contact her?"

"In no way. But, and this is purely personal opinion, I think you should tear down that stairwell and put another in its place. It may be a good way indeed to thank her!"

THE END

## THE LAUGHING WITCH

(Continued from page 16)

painting ripped from its stretcher, the contents of the parlor lay in jumbled confusion. And through it all, dancing in the crazy light, was the shadow on the wall.

Henry took a deep breath before he spoke again. "I want the three of you to go upstairs and leave me alone. I've got to fix this room." He spoke slowly. "I've been dying to make a few changes around here for years. Now go. I'll be all right."

"But Henry, I . . ."

"Up the stairs now—immediately." The door closed quietly. Sounds of furniture being scrapped across the floorboards again hit the women's ears, but it was more subdued, organized, controlled.

"Well, we might as well go," Bess said. "Now that we're reduced to the servant level, we can sit in the housekeeper's rooms. What ever happened to her anyway?"

"Henry dismissed all the servants weeks ago. Said they were a nuisance," Maud panted as she tried to keep in step with her sister on the stairs. Agnes majestically brought up the rear..

"BUT it's been three days. Are you positive he told you nothing?"

Bess carefully buttered another biscuit before she answered. "No, nothing. I met him by accident in the hall. I had left my book in the dining room and when I couldn't fall asleep, I decided to go down and get it. He was by the door. I noticed he had his hat and coat on and when I asked Henry where he was going, he just said, 'Out,' and left."

"I do hope nothing has happened to him." Worry created more lines on Maud's plain face.

"Brother Henry can take care of

himself—and that's for sure. I snuck a look in his room the other day and came across his accounting books. He has more little deals cooking on the fire than a short-order chef. Financially, we're in damn good shape."

"Don't use profanity, Bess. It's vulgar," Agnes sat back. "And I wish you hadn't gone into his room like that. If Henry wanted us to know about his affairs, he would have told us."

"What is this nonsense?" Bess' words were sharp. "I know I've been away for a long time and people do change—but I don't remember things being like this. Both of you are scared stiff. Of what? Of that shadow thing? Of Henry? You used to boss us around left and right when we were kids, Agnes. And since you were the oldest, you became a mother to us after Mom died. And now you jump if Henry so much as belches."

"Henry doesn't belch, dear," Maud gently reminded her. "But things are different. You weren't here when Henry threw William out. He was furious, and I've never seen William angry before. Both of them shouted at each other. Agnes and I weren't present, of course, but we could hear everything quite clearly."

"They were in the parlor. William cried, 'I'll never leave this house—never!' And Henry yelled back, 'We'll see about that' or words to that effect. Henry dragged William to the front door. It slammed and the lock was shot." Agnes folded her napkin.

"And then after we heard of William's death—it wasn't consumption, Agnes. He was stabbed during an argument, but I didn't want you to know then. Following his death, we noticed that—that shadow on the wall. I don't care if you think I'm crazy—but it looks just like William!" Hysteria crept into Maud's voice.

"And I agree with Henry—it must be something in that room. Maybe the house has shifted and caused some sort of realignment of the mouldings on the wall, or the floor is sinking something perfectly normal. But let us be off. There is still sewing to be done. We promised more patterns for the church bazaar next week."

The three ladies in mourning rose from the table and walked down the hall to the parlor. The sewing things had always been kept there ever since they could remember.



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At the entrance, Bess paused. "I think someone's at the door. I'll go see." She turned away and walked to the front of the house.

Agnes and Maud went into the room. A match scratched and the lamp was lighted.

"Now let's see, where did I leave those scissors—oh my God. The wall—there are TWO shadows!" Agnes collapsed into Maud's arms.

Bess staggered into the room, a telegram crushed in her hand. "A messenger," she gasped dully. "There's been an accident. Henry is—dead!"

THE END

## HELLFIRE MANSION

(Continued from page 20)

window I could open myself. All the others are a little warped and I have to use a crowbar."

"Sue, remember you said you were locked in the fruit cellar for two hours—when I had to deliver those pictures to Toronto?"

"Sure. I finally had to take the door off by its hinges—luckily there was a screwdriver on the shelf. I got out only a few minutes before you came back. But, so what?"

"Sue, there was no earthly reason for that door to stick."

"Don't be silly, Rick. This is an old house. It's damp in the cellar. Besides—maybe the wood swelled."

"Then again, maybe not. Maybe this house hates us and wants us to leave."

"I think you've been hitting the turpentine bottle again. I've told you time and time again, you're supposed to use it, not drink it."

"Very funny. But come upstairs, if you feel well enough. I want you to see what I've done."

"Sure. I feel fine already."

They climbed up and went into Rick's studio.

Rick stopped short. "Oops, I see where I've made a mistake. The paint's too thick. I'll just take the old palette knife there and . . . now I was sure I left it here." He rumaged through a pile of half-used paint tubes and jars. "Where the hell is it? Damn it, anyway. You'd expect with all this space I could at least find something."

"Maybe you brought it downstairs."

"No, I was just using it. And I left it right here." Rick pointed to a cleared off area on the worktable.

"Well, I'll go down and look anyway."

She clumped down the stairs.

"Oh, my God!"

Rick ran down immediately.

"Here's your knife," she said bitterly. "And look." She pointed.

Rick peered into her studio. "But—this can't be! Your rug—it's slashed in a dozen places!"

"With your knife."

"Honey, you don't think I did it."

"Then who did? The Man in the Moon? Maybe you're jealous. Maybe you made that tree fall on purpose so you could have time to ruin my work and maybe even kill me in the bargain. Maybe . . ."

"Get ahold of yourself, Sue! You're hysterical. Please, honey, calm down. Hey, I love you. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

"Oh, Rick," Sue collapsed into his arms, sobbing brokenly. "I didn't mean it. Any of it. It's just that I'm so upset. It was the nicest rug I've ever made. And now it's ruined!"

"Jesus—I smell something burning!"

He flung himself up the stairs. Flames from the studio had already begun to eat into the floor of the hall.

Sue came stumbling behind carrying a heavy pot of dye.

"Use this," she gasped.

Rick flung the water into the room, then ran down for more liquid dye. He and Sue extinguished the flames enough to be able to get into the studio. The pails of sand kept near the window for just that purpose soon put out the rest of the inferno.

He looked with blank eyes at the damage. Every single painting, study, model and sketch had been ruined. So was his equipment. He kicked a still-smoldering stretcher across the room. Sue came up behind him and gently touched his cheek. She turned and went downstairs.

Later he joined her.

"Are you thinking the same thing I am?"

"Probably, Rick. Let's leave."

"All right. I'll call the broker tomorrow. Luckily we'll only forfeit the deposit."

"And we can move in with my parents until we find another place. There's no use fighting it." She sighed. "It would have been so nice to live here, alone—just the two of us."

"Yes, but I don't think it would be worth the aggravation—and the danger. We could have been killed in that fire."

"Still, it would have been nice to have a real home."